

Inspectors report traffic moving as usual

Border checked for Libyan 'hit squad'

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Border inspectors reported business as usual today despite a careful lookout for members of a Libyan "hit squad" thought to be in Mexico.

Four Middle Eastern travelers have been stopped for further investigation since the alert began Monday, said Chief U.S. Customs Inspector Andy Townsend today. None of the four were detained.

ONE BORDER INSPECTOR has worn a bullet-proof vest for his bridge duties, but most of the customs inspectors in El Paso and along the Texas border simply stepped up routine inspections of passports, cars and purchases, officials said.

"It's not exciting to us," said customs inspector Rocky Galarza, 20, at the Bridge of the Americas port-of-entry.

"To us it is just dangerous. We don't get any kind of glory feeling about this, we just use extra caution."

THE SEARCH HAS BEEN complicated by Christmas shoppers, who have swelled the daily average number of cars crossing the three El Paso bridges from 40,000 to about 45,000.

Some 33 million cars annually cross the U.S.-Mexico border into Texas and New Mexico, or 92 million people in cars or on foot, said regional U.S. Customs spokesman Charles Conroy in Houston. The amount increases significantly during the Christmas season, he added.

Some 1,270 Customs inspectors cover that traffic in Texas and New Mexico. The INS staff for Texas includes 78 people for the three El Paso ports.

"WE CAN'T AFFORD to take this lightly," said Customs director Manny Najera, whose district runs from Fort Hancock to Columbus, N.M. "So we decided to tighten up and check passports and anything else that caught our attention."

El Paso offices now have composite sketches of the subjects and background information. But the distribution was so slow in some areas that border officials depended on newspapers for their sketches.

"We've seen more on television than we've gotten from the government," said Mitchell Britt, INS officer in charge at Laredo bridges.

Fred Boyett, assistant regional commissioner for U.S. Customs in Houston, said the information flow

had been as rapid as possible "without disrupting the national security."

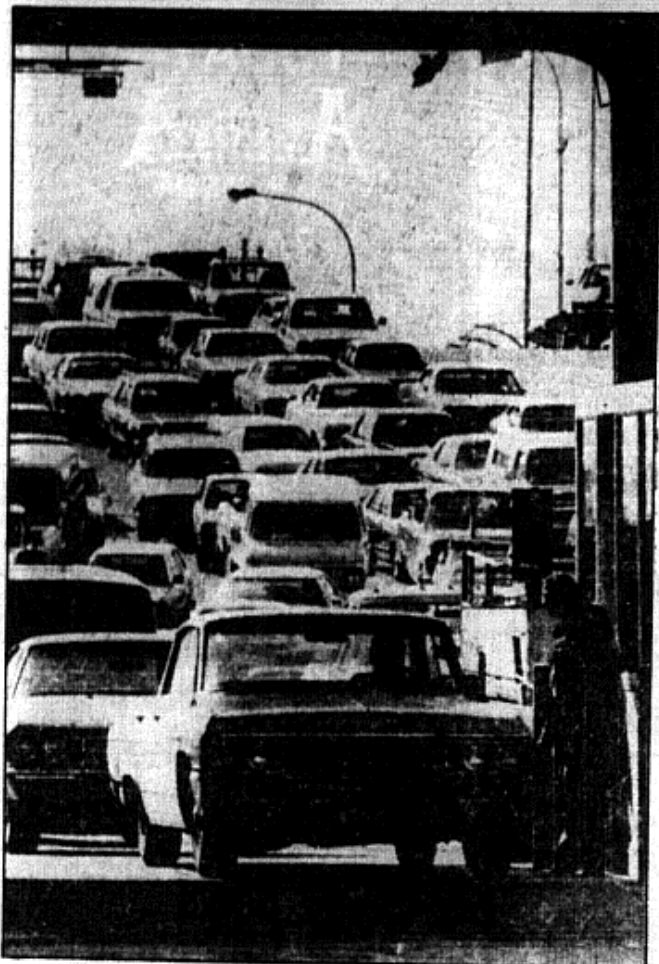
ALAN GIUGNI, INS district director in El Paso, said the major local impact of the extra checks had been a stackup of Christmas traffic.

If border officials found someone suspicious attempting to enter the country, they would alert local FBI agents, Najera said. The FBI declined to comment on the situation.

U.S. Consul Keith Powell at the U.S. Consulate General in Juarez declined comment when asked if he had received any information about the "hit team."

SOME FEDERAL OFFICIALS were quoted Thursday saying that Arab communities along the border might be sounded for rumors about the squad. However, a Lebanese restaurant owner in a sizeable Middle Eastern community in Juarez said local feeling is that if the squad exists and is trying to cross into the U.S., El Paso will not be the city they choose.

"It's harder to cross from Juarez than it would be from Tijuana, our people feel," said George Yanor, 42. "We hear a lot of talk, but absolutely nothing about anyone coming into this area."



Herald-Post photo by Ruben Ramirez

Traffic backed up a long way at Bridge of the Americas today. Officials were stopping more motorists because of Libyan threat.